

# Co-Design for Co-Existence

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Our cities are in a state of transformation towards archipelagos of different realities: In shopping malls we enjoy the clean imitation of the city, our historic centres tend to become museums for touristic purposes and gated communities allow its inhabitants a safe life surrounded by people who think the same way as they do (Image 01). In contrary to the middle age where the historic town was an artificial place protected from the wild nature outside, the contemporary city is built up of multiple islands. Rem Koolhaas revealed this urban issue already in 1995 through the notion of the *generic city*<sup>1</sup>.

Besides these privileged areas the search for the clean and perfect in urban planning leads to the spatial exclusion of certain societies, often placed in marginal zones: Trailer parks are pushed towards the edge of the city (Image 02), prostitution areas tend to be limited to mega brothels and immigration camps are placed far from any human settlement. The notion of *containment politics*<sup>2</sup> takes part into the making of a *bubble city*<sup>3</sup>: urban islands reach from gated communities to socio-spatial margins.

The reflective practice Alive Architecture researches into the role of the architect in and around marginal bubbles in the contemporary city. The intention is to create open moments of *co-existence*<sup>4</sup> between inhabitants and surrounding realities through a participative approach. How can people in and around the *zones urbaines sensibles*<sup>5</sup> be involved in the making of the project? At what stages of the design process can the co-design be applied? What are the problems and challenges of co-design in these urban fragile zones? What can we learn from this current state of designing together to project future developments of co-design?

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<sup>1</sup> Rem Koolhaas: The Generic City, in SMLXL, p.1238-1264, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam, 1994

<sup>2</sup> BAVO (Gideon Boie & Matthias Pauwels): Too active to act, p.34, Valiz Publishers, Amsterdam, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Petra Pferdmenges: Bubble City, lecture given in the framework of the international Master at Sint-Lucas Architectuur Brussels, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Tim Rieniets, Jennifer Sigler, Kees Christiaanse: Open City: Designing Co-existence, Sun-pubishers Rotterdam, 2009

<sup>5</sup> ZUS: The architecture office established the name of their office through the three capital letters of *Zones Urbaines Sensibles* to express their interest into socio-spatial aspects in underdeveloped neighborhoods



Image 01: Gated Community, The La Rue Team, Buyer representation & relocation specialists in Houston, [www.down2houston.com](http://www.down2houston.com)



Image 02: Stijn Beeckmann, photographer: Wonen op Wielen, Trailer Parks Flanders, 2010

## 1. Co-Existence

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In the 4th International Architecture Biennale in Rotterdam in 2009, Kees Christiaanse revealed the notion of the *Open City*<sup>6</sup> where co-existence among the polarized society happens through infrastructure that connects the different islands of the contemporary city (image 03). He calls for innovation through design as a weapon against the tendency of the closeness of the city. In his discourse Christiaanse refers to the project *Potteries Think Belt*<sup>7</sup> of Cedric Price (image 04) that is one of the main reference in his discourse. In Price's proposal from 1964 for a university campus in Staffordshire, England, the British architect and thinker proposes an open concept for the university: Instead of designing an academic bubble disconnected from the rest of the city he spreads the campus through out the city. Price proposes to re-use the existing railway and its abandoned buildings that are located in different neighbourhoods. The rails do not only allow easy movement between the different buildings but are used themselves as an educational space through the application of mobile classrooms.

Alive Architecture proposes co-existence of inhabitants of socio-spatial margins and surrounding city-dwellers through urban micro-interventions. The re-use of urban vacant spaces or neglected public space serve as new nodes in the existing infrastructure in order to expand the network of flux of the different actors. The intention is to create open moments of visual or physical encounter.

While the projects provoke movement of people, it is the occupation by the different users that transforms the stage into a lively event.

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<sup>6</sup> Kees Christiaanse: The Open City and Its Enemies, in *Open City: Designing Co-existence*, p.25-36, Sun-publishers, Amsterdam, 2009

<sup>7</sup> Cedric Price: *Potteries Thinkbelt*, Routledge Publishers, London, 2008

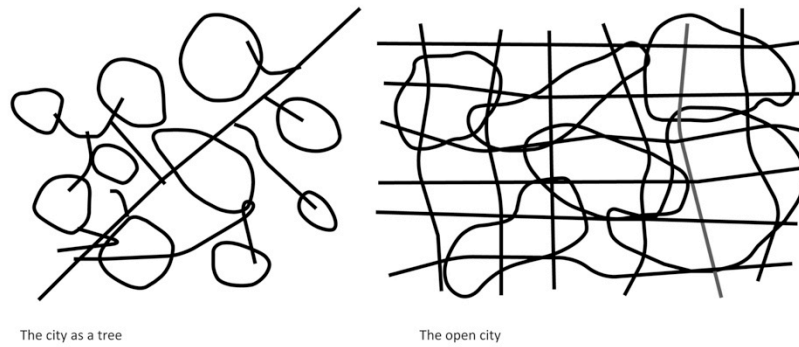


Image 03: Kees Christiaanse: Diagrams City as a Tree and Open City, 2007, in Open City: Designing Co-existence

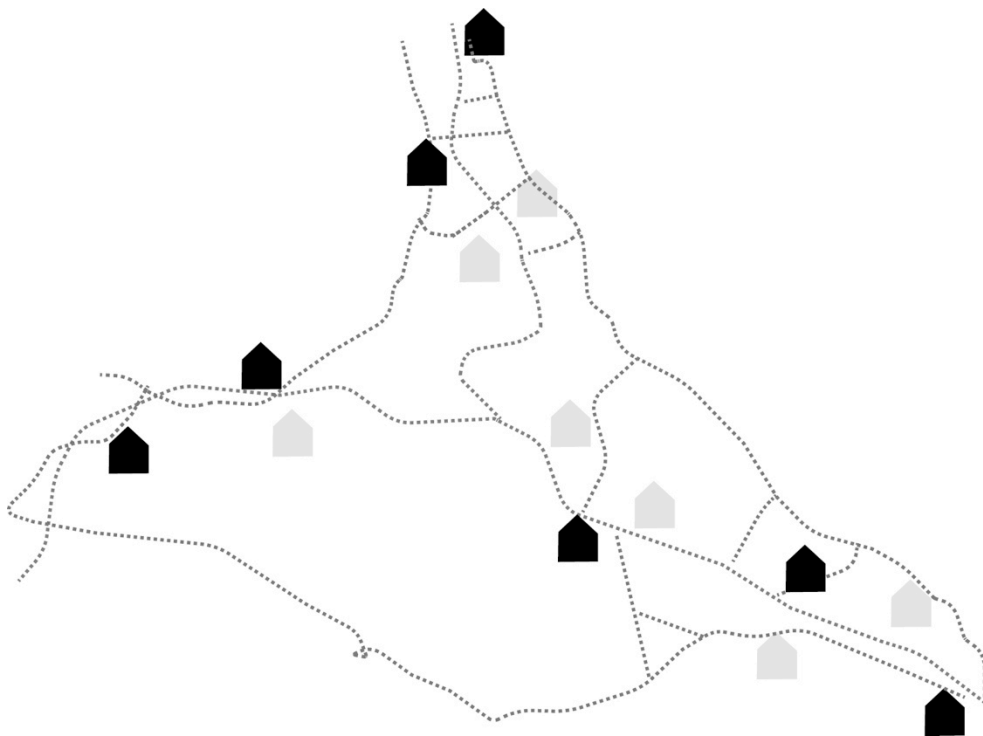


Image 04: Cedric Price: Potteries Thinkbelt, Proposal for a university campus spread throughout the city of Staffordshire, England, 1964, in Cedric Price: Potteries Thinkbelt



## 2. Co-Design

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In order to act in marginal areas it is crucial to involve the multiple perspectives of the diverse actors in the different phases of the design.

The challenge in socio-spatial margins is to find ways to get people involved into the process as the level of trust towards newcomers is usually very low. Alive Architecture applies a lateral approach: Through intensive fieldwork in the neighbourhood encounter is constructed by different means. Discussions with people and interactions of those with the temporary project become the core-elements in order to develop the project together.

### 2.1. Engage in order to act

The *wijkcontract*<sup>8</sup> in Brussels is a good example for engaging people in order to revitalize underdeveloped neighbourhoods. Within the duration of the contract an analysis of the state of buildings and public spaces in the area is realized. The city is obliged to work with the inhabitants and different association to make the future user part of the design and realisation process. Clients, inhabitants and designers develop projects collectively through different means: Interviews with local people, round tables for public discussions, workshops to develop ideas and participation of inhabitants in decision-making are the principle instruments applied.

Alive Architecture uses a similar method in which engagement of people leads to action: Through encounter of different actors the individual perspectives on the neighbourhood are captured and give an insight into the wishes of people for their surroundings. Instruments are spontaneous interviews with and mental maps of people in public space, organized workshops with inhabitants and community workers and round tables with community workers and associations in neighbourhoods. The design of the brief builds onto the different personal stories and needs of those involved in the process. In that way actors become co-designers of the brief.

### 2.2. Act in order to engage

Alive Architecture then translates the brief into one or several 1:1 action/s that are realized in the neighbourhood's public space through the use of quick and simple means. The temporary interventions are realized with a very low budget and in a very short period of time. The action provokes engagement of people with the urban intervention and therefore becomes a tool to create communica-

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.bruxelles.be/artdet.cfm/4099>: website city of Brussels, Information on the notion of 'Wijkcontracten' or 'Contrats de Quartier'

tion. Reactions of people are observed, mapped and analysed to forward the making of the design.

If successful the action is repeated or translated into a (semi-) permanent project. Actors become co-authors of the project at the different stages of the project: From the first action where encounter is constructed to the final project any intervention is transformed by spatial occupation.

The method of acting in order to engage involves actors into the design process of the final project and invites people to take part in the space making itself. The user becomes the co-author of the project.

### **2.3. Comparing the methods**

The method applied in phase one is to start from engagement in order to act and is widely used as an instrument of participation in urban design. The problem of it is the high consummation of time before actually moving on to the design of the urban intervention. Especially in marginal neighbourhoods where people's level of trust towards newcomers is very low, the encounter with people is difficult and time consuming. Further the notion of co-designing the brief responds to people's needs but excludes the possibility to provide a creative intervention, a project that they would not have been able to imagine in their dreams.

In the method applied in the second phase engagement of people is provoked through action. By applying very simple and quick means a variety of actors are involved into an action in order to forward the making of the design. It is an efficient way to test if a project that responds to the co-written brief will be accepted if realized and to see if and how the actors can be involved into the transformation of the project as co-authors of the space.

## **3. Case-Studies**

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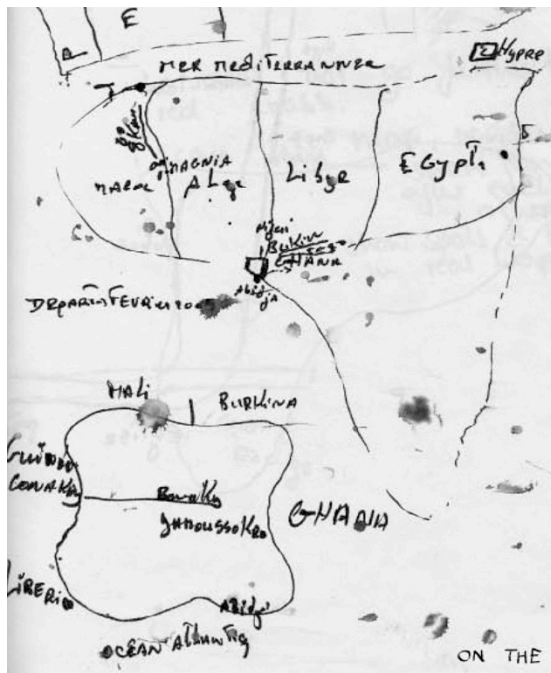
The following 3 research-based projects were initiated and developed by Alive Architecture. They serve as case studies to explain the participative design methods in the challenging context of urban margins.

### **3.1. Asica Enters Europe**

In September 2005 six hundred immigrants from Asia and Africa crossed the border between Morocco and the Spanish enclave Ceuta in order to enter the fortress Europe. In that context Alive Architecture realized a field research through eclectic mappings in order to understand the spatial reality of the new immigrants and their current co-existence with the local society of Ceuta (Image 05-07). In the forest around the camp the new immigrants continued their Asican (Asian / African) informal way of occupation of space (Image 06/07). While the day they moved between camp and city in order to participate into the

European reality. Along this promenade different spots were appropriated by the new city dwellers (Image 08).

Alive Architecture organized a workshop with the new immigrants in order to understand their needs and current encounter with local inhabitants. The five most important wishes (cooking, working, leisure activities, education & privacy) were addressed through urban installations in vacant spaces along the existing flow between the camp and the city (Image 08/09). The new spots responded not only to the needs of the immigrants (Image 10/11), but were also new gathering spots for city inhabitants. Through its occupation the space could be transformed, adapted and reinvented by the user. Therefore people became the co-author of the installation.



### ON THE ROAD

i hit the road in Ghana on the 10-5-1004. First i travelled with the bus through Burkina Faso to get to Niger. i spent one month to make some money to travel further. in Tambovasset, Algeria, i spent 6 month working on a construction site. From here we start the Sahara - Crossing on Pic-up trucks. The Crossing is very dangerous. Many people die in the desert. They leave us before the border to Morocco. Here we cross the mountains to get to Morocco. From here i walked 300 kilometer to the border of Ceuta.

Image 05: Left: Abu from Ghana: Mental Map of where he comes from, 2005  
Right: Abu from Ghana: Expressing his travel from Ghana to Ceuta as part of an interview, Spain, 2005

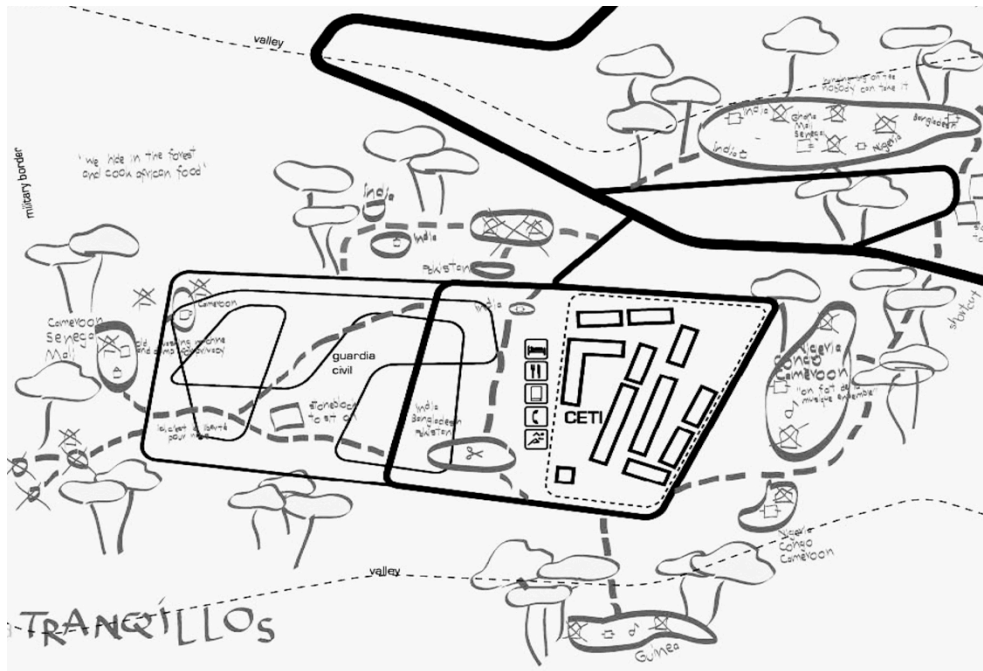


Image 06: Alive Architecture: Map of the immigration camp and the informal use of African and Asian immigrants in the forest around it, 2005



Image 07: Alive Architecture: Photo of informal use in the forest around the camp, 2005

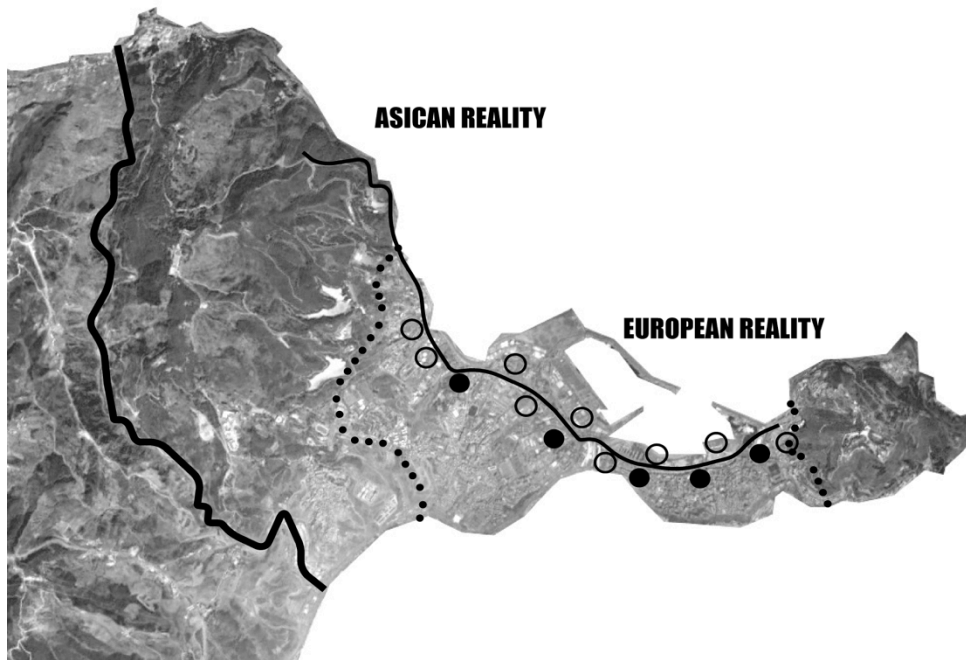


Image 08: Alive Architecture: Map of the circulation of new immigrants between the immigration camp and the city, existing gathering spots and new urban interventions in vacant spaces, 2006

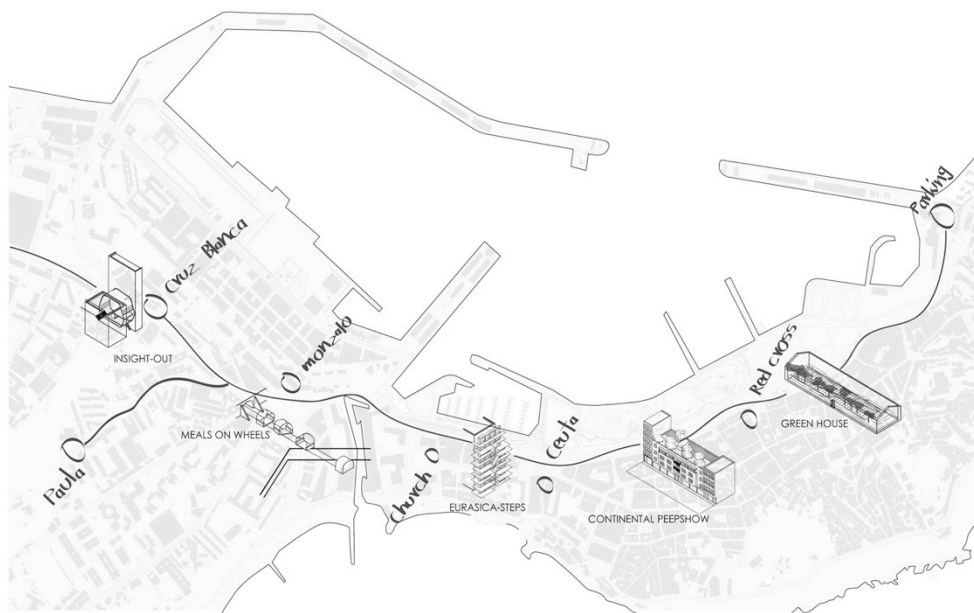


Image 09: Alive Architecture: City-map with the five new spots along promenade between camp and city centre. The map addresses new immigrants as well as local inhabitants, 2006

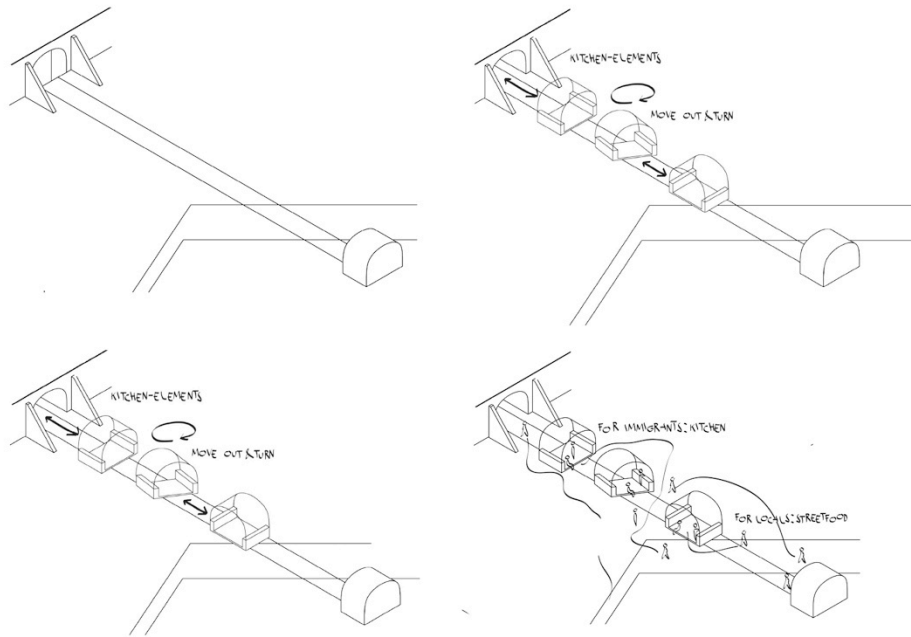


Image 10: Alive Architecture: Proposal of the urban installation 'Meals on Wheels' in a leftover tunnel. The project leaves the opportunity to the user to occupy the space through movable kitchens, 2006



Image 11: Alive Architecture: Proposal urban installation 'Meals on Wheels', 2006

### 3.2. Fairground Pleasures

The fairground is one of the main urban events in the summer in Brussels. For 38 days the food and amusement stalls occupy 3.2 km of the city's polygon. The strip, usually dominated by a frequented street and loads of parking places, is transformed into a lively event with a temporary linear promenade. (Image 12/13). After the attractions and stalls were de-installed, Alive Architecture realized several interviews with inhabitants of the surrounding neighbourhood. While the noise of the fairground seemed to be a disturbing aspect for them, almost all participants appreciated the fact that the street became a pedestrian zone for the period of the event. Several people referred to the fact that it offered a safe place for their kids to play in front of their houses.

This first observation lead to several 1:1 actions that proposed to turn the street into a pedestrian zone for exceptional moments as weekends or holidays. A temporary pedestrian crossing, a candyfloss stand and closing the street for cars with a rope provoked interactions with passing by people (image 14-16). Positive reactions of people lead to the idea to turn the street permanently into a pedestrian zone (image 17). Beyond a place to play for kids the restaurant owners could expand their spatial occupation (public barbecues, terraces, informal selling's...) towards the street throughout the year. Posters were hung up along the road that proposed the permanent solution to the public. People could share their opinion on the project and make alternative proposals.



Image 12: Alive Architecture: Spatial use temporary fairground Brussels before stands open: strolling people and playing kids occupy the temporary pedestrian promenade; restaurants expand their terraces onto the street, 2011



Image 13: Alive Architecture, Mapping of spatial use after the temporary fairground Brussels. Through informal interviews wishes of people are observed. 2011



Image 14: Alive Architecture: 1:1 actions to provoke reactions of people on a possible transformation of the street into a temporary pedestrian zone, 2011





Image 15: Alive Architecture: 1:1 actions to provoke reactions of people on a possible transformation of the street into a temporary pedestrian zone, 2011



Image 16: Alive Architecture: 1:1 actions to provoke reactions of people on a possible transformation of the street into a temporary pedestrian zone, 2011



Image 17: Alive Architecture: Proposal to turn the street into a permanent pedestrian zone to offer a play space to kids and the possibility to restaurants to expand their terraces and the use of barbecues towards the street, 2011

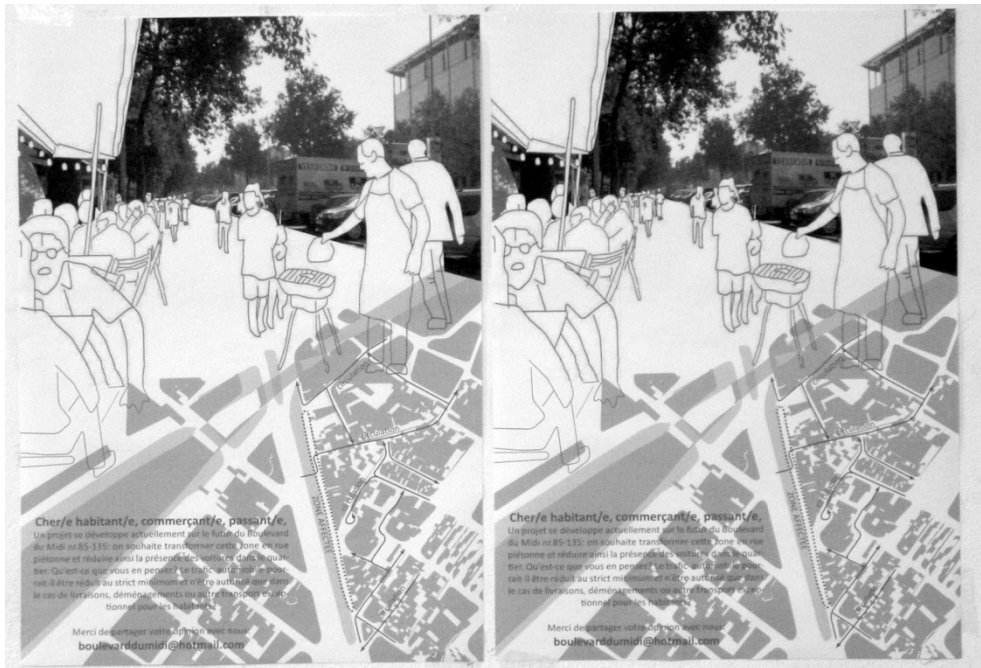


Image 18: Alive Architecture: poster for public enquiry to ask people's opinion on a possible transformation of the strip into a pedestrian zone, 2011/2012

### 3.3 Visible Invisible

While the city of Antwerp transformed its red-light district into a mega-brothel (Image 19) in 2006, the city of Brussels expresses the need to find a more inclusive approach.

An observation of the principal street of Brussels red-light district revealed the notion of rental prices, vacant spaces and visual relations (image 20): While women pay 250 Euro for 12 hours to rent a place in a window on the ground level, the upper floors are rented at 250 Euro for a whole month. Still about 40% of those spaces remain empty. These spaces profit from a visual relation with the railroad system where the international train runs between Paris and Amsterdam. Through several encounters with Espace P (who defend the rights of the sex-workers in Belgium), a lack of openness of the street became evident. Alive Architecture proposed to transform the upper floors into further working spaces for creative people that search for an affordable space in Brussels (Image 21-23). The same concept as on the ground floor windows is applied: By future uses the space could be appropriated to attain public visibility (Image 21). In order to provoke reactions of local people on the project Alive Architecture painted flashes (Image 24) on the ground to indicate possible future uses. Further an exhibition of the project was organized on the grey wall of the street (Image 25). People were actively involved and expressed their needs through discussions. This gained knowledge lead to the transformation of the project.



Image 19: Alive Architecture: Villa Tinto, Mega-brothel in Antwerp that replaces the previous red-light district, construction 2006



Image 20: Alive Architecture: Mapping of rue d'Aerschot Brussels on rental prices, vacant spaces and visual relations, 2011

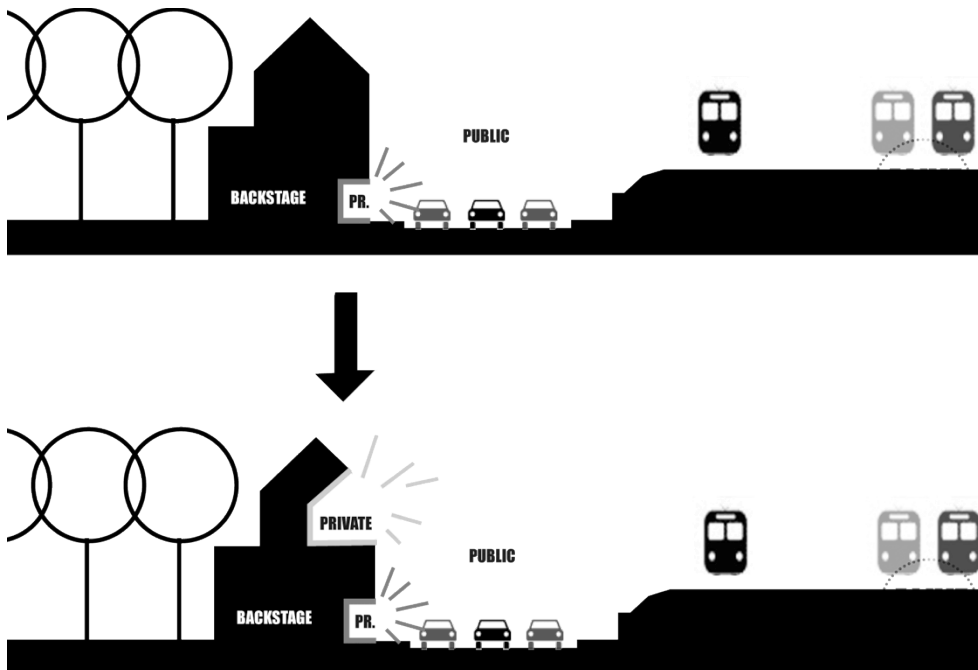


Image 21: Alive Architecture: Occupation upper floors through the creative society in the rue d'Aerschot. They may appropriate and expose their work towards the public, 2011



Image 22: Left: Alive Architecture: appropriation of space and expression towards public space of activities in the windows on the ground floor, 2011  
 Right: Alive Architecture: prospection of user becoming part of design: appropriation of space and expression towards public space through creative society



Image 23: Alive Architecture: Model of the prospection for Brussels red-light district, 2011



Image 24: Alive Architecture: Engaging with people through painting possible functions for the vacant upper floors on the street in Brussels red-light district, 2011



Image 25: Alive Architecture: Creating a platform of discussion through installing an exhibition of possible future uses of the vacant upper floors on the street in Brussels red-light district, 2011

### 3.4. Comparing the case studies

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All three case studies are developed in and around socio-spatial margins and apply an approach from within space in order to provide co-existence of different realities. While all case studies make people become co-authors by giving them the possibility to transform the final project, the method of involving people into co-writing the brief and co-developing the further design process varies in the different projects.

*Asica enters Europe* started from informal engagement with people in order to develop a design project. An intensive field research allowed deepening first encounters in order to build trust with a group of actors. These contacts made it possible to engage people into a workshop to reveal their needs. They expressed their wishes and therefore became the co-writers of the brief. A series of personal stories became the base for the development of a design project.

*Fairground Pleasures* started in a similar way: Engaging people through informal interviews and mental maps revealed the needs and wishes of people and lead to a brief of how to act in the neighbourhood. While the design of *Asica enters Europe* was never materialized on the sight, in *Fairground Pleasures* three actions were realized in order to test possible future interventions. These actions led to further engagement of people and to a final proposal for a permanent project.

*Visible Invisible* starts from engagement with an association in order to propose a possible design intervention. Being one of the most difficult marginal areas it is almost impossible to engage informally with actors in Brussels red light district. Therefore Alive Architecture tested the design proposal in the space by painting possible future uses for the upper floors onto the street in order to provoke reactions of people. Further an exhibition was organized which served as a framework of discussion with local actors. While the actions in *Fairground Pleasures* were applied to test future interventions proposed by a variety of actors, the temporary interventions in *Visible Invisible* made encounter with and therefore involvement of local actors possible. The reactions of those were observed and used to transform the brief in order to respond to people's needs.

### Conclusion

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The research on the role of the architect in socio-spatial margins demands a participatory approach to approach the socio-spatial context. In order to not reinforce the marginal islands in the archipelago of the contemporary city but to create open moments it is important to approach the areas in a bottom-up way. Different actors have to be involved at any stage of the project. The principal tool of Alive Architecture to achieve the participation of the future users is to work from within space in order to understand and fulfil people's needs. 'Engage' and 'act' are the keywords in order to involve people into the design process.

The method 'engage in order to act' applied in phase one starts from engagement with people through informal interviews, workshops, etc. in order to co-

write the brief. Even though the application of the method is very time consuming, it is commonly used to involve inhabitants in urban design.

The method 'act in order to engage' applied in phase two provokes engagement through action in order to integrate people into the further design. By testing the brief through temporary intervention, people interact with or react to the project. The action becomes a framework for encounter.

Might it be possible to apply the method 'act in order to engage' from the very beginning of a project in order to construct a platform of exchange?

The method would then start from quick and simple actions with the purpose to engage people into the design process. Reactions are recorded, mapped and analysed in order to learn from the temporary intervention and to include people's wishes in the following action. The process can be repeated and the urban action improved until a certain level of success is achieved. This is the case when a diversity of actors seems to be satisfied and when the temporary project is used in a lively way.

The method proposes the involvement of people in an easy and time-efficient way by realizing actions to provoke engagement. By reacting to and interacting with the temporary intervention actors become co-designers of a project they might have never imagined in their dreams.

### **Kurzbiografie**

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Petra Pferdmenges is running the research-based practice Alive Architecture. The multidisciplinary platform reclaims the public role of designers by making social challenges explicit through unsolicited projects. Since 2010 the approach is developed further through a PhD (design research @ Sint-Lucas Architectuur & RMIT Melbourne). Petra Pferdmenges teaches design & theory at Sint-Lucas Architectuur & at the ULG. Previously, Petra worked for five years in renowned architecture offices throughout Europe (Edouard Francois in Paris, Josep Llinas in Barcelona, Architecten Cie in Amsterdam and ARJM in Brussels) after having completed the International Master in Architecture at the TU Delft, Netherlands.